

MEDIA RELEASE



NSW DEPARTMENT OF
PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

6 May 2008

FISH HABITAT TO IMPROVE THANKS TO RESNAGGING PROGRAM

Fish habitat is set to improve in the Barwon-Darling River between Brewarrina and Bourke as a result of a resnagging program, the General Manager of the Western Catchment Management Authority (CMA), Daryl Green, announced today.

"This important project involves the reintroduction of at least 204 large woody habitats, or snags, across 11 sites in the demonstration reach. This will help with the recovery of endangered or vulnerable fish populations including the silver perch and western populations of olive perchlet and purple-spotted gudgeon, plus the river snail," he said.

The project will be officially launched today by one of the landholders who have a resnagging site adjacent to their property, John Gordon of West Moolta Station, at 11am at the Back O Bourke Exhibition Centre.

The Western CMA worked in collaboration with the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) to manage the reintroduction of large woody habitats at sites where the presence of snags is currently very low or non-existent.

NSW DPI Project Manager, David Cordina, said the program would demonstrate how this type of intervention could greatly benefit native fish populations.

"Snags are the inland river equivalent of marine reefs. They are essential for the completion of lifecycles in many species of native fish and provide refuge and shelter, feeding and spawning sites."

The Barwon-Darling River, once an important trade route for river boats, had thousands of tonnes of snags removed for ease of navigation and for fuel for paddle-steamers.

"The reintroduced snags, sourced from approved clearing works, provide an alternative use for cleared timber while achieving ecological benefits," he said.

The DPI assessed the recreational use of the River and held public meetings to allow people to provide input about the snags' locations.

"Signs at main boat ramps will indicate the resnagging sites and where possible, we have built on existing snags to minimise the impact on boat operators and waterskiiers. People wanting more information on their locations should contact the DPI. Obviously, boat operators are advised to exercise caution as always when travelling at speed on inland rivers," Mr Cordina said.

John Gordon and his brother Andrew and father Merv farmed landholdings along the Darling River around Bourke since the 1970s. They have a resnagging site located in the river adjacent to West Moolta and are supportive of the project.

"It has to be a plus," Mr John Gordon said.

"If you increase the habitat then it should lead to an increase in native fish populations," he said.



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The Gordons are anglers who have witnessed a decline in native fish numbers over the past forty years.

"We've definitely seen a decline in native fish such as yellow belly, catfish and cod and an increase in carp and the associated problems they bring by destroying native fish habitat and river vegetation and degrading the riverbank.

"Putting the snags back into the river will give the native fish a leg up and hopefully result in some flow on effects for the health of the river as well," Mr Gordon said.

The majority of snags were donated by landholders in the Western and Central Western Catchments of NSW and the Narromine Shire Council, providing a substantial contribution to the project and the environment.

Snags play an important role in river health, with studies showing that streams with snags are likely to have higher numbers of fish and invertebrates than those without. They provide hiding, spawning and resting places for native fish; rich reservoirs of food for invertebrates and other organisms; roosting places for birds; and habitat for animals such as tortoises and native water rats. Snags also assist in developing deep holes, helping maintain channel shapes and protecting banks from erosion during fast flows.

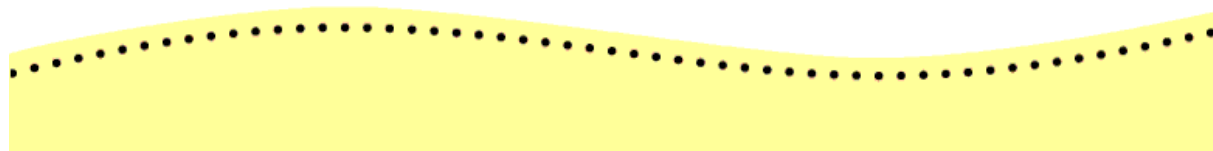
Removal of snags from NSW rivers has been listed as a key threatening process under the Fisheries Management Act 1994 because of its negative impacts on several threatened species and the endangered ecological community of the lowland catchment of the Darling River.

BACKGROUND:

From 1859-1931, approximately eighty paddle-steamers travelled the Darling. At its peak, the Bourke Wharf had three steam driven cranes handling 40,000 bales of wool a year. They were shipped down the Darling to ports in South Australia and Victoria and sent by rail to Adelaide and Melbourne for local textiles and export. Following the advent of irrigation on farms in the 1880s, cotton, citrus fruits and wheat were also shipped by paddle-steamers.

The paddle-steamers used massive amounts of timber, sourced from the riverbank to fuel boilers for power, causing a long-term reduction in habitat for animals and riverbank stability. They were also responsible for large-scale removal of fallen trees (snags) from the river to improve river navigation, which was encouraged by the government of the time.

In 1886 the Harbours and Rivers Department was commissioned to prepare a report into improving navigation on the Darling River. In the resulting report published in 1890 "Locking of the Darling River" one of the Department's surveyors, Mr G H Halligan, highlights the "*desirability of at once taking steps to remove all timber from the bed of the river, whether dangerous at present or not*". Not content with removing the timber within the river, he goes on to advise that "*in order to permanently improve the river, and prevent future expense in connection with snagging, it would be imperative to clear all timber from the losing bank for a distance of at least 60 feet*".



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Although Mr Halligan's advice to clear all vegetation from riverbanks was fortunately not followed, tens of thousands of snags were taken from the river which has, in part, led to a decline in native fish numbers.

ENDS

Further information: ON MOBILE ONLY THIS WEEK

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Caption: John and Angela Gordon with son Thomas.

Caption: Mr and Mrs Barker of Brewarrina.

